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ABSTRACT

In order to educate students in state and local government and to create a better appreciation of the political process, the author contends that the traditional approach to teaching in Texas must be supplemented with innovative techniques. One successful technique is the use of the videotape as a teaching aid. Extension of the vote to the eighteen year old, failure of large numbers of students to exercise the franchise, emphasis on the recruitment of racial minorities, and a significant increase in the number of older students who are returning to the classroom are developments which require new methods to reach the "new public." The videotape can be a useful aid in the teaching process, offering students increased access to political personalities, enabling students to learn more about the specifics of their own immediate environment, enabling students to stay abreast of developing problems and solutions in state and local government, permitting additional material which is normally not covered in traditional textbooks to be brought to the attention of students, and adding a sense of realism to government policies. Two major problems with using the video tape as a supplemental teaching aid are inertia on the part of the faculty and obtaining institutional financial support. (Author/JR)

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"The Videotape As A Teaching Aid
in State and Local Government"

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Abstract

Because of the importance of educating students in state and local government to have a better appreciation of the political system and to become ultimately engaged in the political process, it is necessary that the traditional approach of teaching this course be supplemented with innovative techniques. The technique discussed in this paper is the use of the videotape as a teaching aid.

Within the last ten years there have been four developments which require that we exert a greater effort in meeting our goals in teaching state and local government, i.e., the extension of the vote of the eighteen year old, failure of large numbers of students to exercise the franchise after completion of the course, emphasis on the recruitment of racial minorities, and a significant increase in the number of students over twenty-five, who are returning to the classroom.

Keeping these developments in mind, videotapes were made with eleven area officials for use in my classroom as supplemental teaching tools. The students reacted both positively and negatively in their evaluation of the videotapes. On the basis of my use of the videotapes I found a number of positive features which complement the traditional approach as well as a number of possible uses in the future teaching of this course.

Purpose and Perspective

The subject of this paper is the use of the videotape as a teaching aid in state and local government in Texas.¹ The purpose of this paper is to share with you my experiences² with the videotape, reactions of the participants, student reactions and some possible opportunities and problems that exist for the future use of the videotape in teaching state and local government. The videotape is only a means to an end, and since the techniques and technology employed in teaching are largely determined and conditioned by goals, I will preface more specific remarks on the use of the videotape with some general comments concerning my educational philosophy as it relates to the teaching of state and local government in Texas.

It is in goals that an educational philosophy is reflected. Those who teach a course in state and local government in Texas have numerous goals, each with a different degree of importance attached to them. However, there are two goals which are of primary importance. First, as one student of Texas politics has stated in his interpretation of the Legislative mandate, we have an obligation to see that

¹I would like to acknowledge the influence and direction of Dr. Freeman, Texas Tech University, who encouraged and stimulated me to pursue the use of videotapes.

²Because of the personal nature of these experiences, the paper will be written in the first person.

"students educated with the use of public funds would have a better appreciation of how the system works."³ The second goal must go beyond this initial goal and question why this appreciation of the political system should be created in the first place. My answer would be so that the student might ultimately be engaged in the political process at the state and local level. Therefore, my educational philosophy in this course is shaped by what I consider to be two primary goals: to teach the students the system, and to do it in such a way so that they will be drawn to the political system and become engaged in it.

The "traditional approach" alone, i.e., lecture-reading-examination, has not met these two primary goals to the extent which I believe they are capable of being met. Rather than minimize the importance of this course, as has been done in some institutions, additional ways of fulfilling the course goals should be sought. I must emphasize that I am not advocating scrapping the "traditional approach." I am suggesting that we supplement that approach in order to better fulfill the course goals. It is my belief that the videotape is a valuable teaching aid for the traditional approach to teaching and learning.

³Fred Gantt Jr., Irving O. Dawson, and Luther G. Hagard, Jr., Governing Texas: Documents and Readings (N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974). p. VI.

Within the last ten years there have been four developments, which in my judgement require that we exert a greater effort in meeting our goals in teaching state and local government in Texas. The use of the videotape, for reasons which will be covered later, can help in this effort. These four developments are: the extension of the franchise to the eighteen year olds; the failure of large numbers of students to exercise the franchise even after completing the course; emphasis on the recruitment of racial minorities; and a significant increase in the number of students over twenty-five, who are returning to the classroom.

Because of the adoption of the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution, there is today an extremely large percentage of college students taking this course who are eligible voting participants in the state and local political system. We are no longer educating them for the future alone, for we are now educating for the present as well. This event, the extension of the franchise to this group, has not only provided an added incentive to improving the quality of instruction, it has also placed a professional obligation upon us to do so.

A second factor which lends itself to the need for innovation is the failure of many students to actively participate in the political process at the state and local level, even after becoming eligible to do so and having had the traditional course in state and local government. The dissemination of knowledge about the political system is not all that is involved in teaching; if we are to meet

both our goals, the students must be stimulated and motivated to utilize that newly gained knowledge.

A third factor which has contributed to the need for innovation in the teaching of state and local government is the increasing number of students from racial minorities. Many of these students, faced with academic deficiencies, can benefit by additional avenues of learning, one of which is the videotape approach. However, in addition to academic deficiencies, many of these students face a more serious disadvantage, for they have not been prepared to cope with the political culture to which they have difficulty identifying and relating. They must be able to see how their subculture relates to the overall political culture. Until we are able to demonstrate that, the minority student will be shortchanged in the classroom. Through the utilization of additional avenues of learning, I believe that these students can learn how the political system functions, develop an appreciation for that system, and learn how they can utilize the system to meet their needs. However, to do this, supplemental learning avenues must be developed; the videotape is but one of these avenues.

The fourth development which should be considered is the tremendous increase of students over twenty-five years of age, who are returning to the classroom. This group must be recognized and remembered when using a particular approach in teaching state and local government in Texas. More than any other group, this one will expect something more than the traditional approach to learning. The videotape can help this particular group to view state and local

government with an added dimension of realism, because it will enable them to see and hear for themselves many of the decision makers with whom they are already familiar.

The four aforementioned factors all relate to the changing educational environment. In the midst of change the question becomes how can the goals in a course relating to state and local government in Texas be attained? The use of the videotape is but one of several techniques which I have employed in response to change in order that the two primary goals earlier defined for this course might be realized. The remainder of this paper will be directed to the procedure which I used, to students' reactions to it, and to what problems and possibilities seem apparent with the use of the videotape in teaching state and local government in Texas.

Videotape Participants

During the fall semester of 1974, eleven area officials consented to record tapes approximately 45 minutes in length.⁴ The tape participants were extremely cooperative and supportive in this endeavor.

Public officials taped for use in my classes were State Senator Max Sherman, who looked at the Texas Constitution and Constitutional

⁴These tapes were made with the assistance of John Clark of the WTSU Media Center.

Revision. Senator Sherman was a participant in the Constitutional Convention. My students were able to listen to ideas and facts not yet incorporated into a textbook. Amarillo Attorney, Wales Madden, a member of the Constitutional Revision Commission, discussed what was actually involved in that particular process. A second tape made by Senator Sherman outlined the legislative process in the Texas Senate, while representative Ben Bynum lectured on the Texas House. My students were able to hear first hand what was going on in Austin, i.e., how the political process worked. Filmed in the 181st District Court, Judge Don Dean discussed his role and office, and Randall County Criminal Attorney George Dowlen related his role as prosecutor. The students could view the inside of a courtroom from their classroom seats.

At the county level, Randall County Judge Woody Pond brought to the students his insights not only as a county judge, but also as presiding officer of the Commissioners' Court. Audrey Bruse and Conway Kuykendall related to the students what they felt all citizens should know about city, county and school taxes. Through examples applying directly to citizens in Randall County, they accomplished what a textbook could not.

Amarillo Mayor Ray Vahue answered questions from his office relating to the structure, function, and problems of municipal government. Panhandle Regional Planning Commission Executive Director Ernie Clark pointed out the activities of his organization. Newly-elected member of the State Board of Education, W.W. (Bill) Carter

people, and as one student wrote, the "permitted them to recognize personalities in government and politics;" they liked the "different viewpoints" which the tapes brought to class; the tapes helped them "to get an up-to-date understanding of each office and person in that office;" and the tapes "stimulated" their interest in the study of government.

Even though the students liked the use of the tapes, it became quite evident, on the basis of their feedback, that the tapes needed to be improved. Several students found some of the tapes to be "boring;" however, it became evident that most of the criticism was of a more technical than substantive nature. Some felt that the tapes were used too much; some felt that the tapes should be no longer than 25 minutes in length; some felt that the individuals could have been better prepared for their interviews; several were critical of the audio on some tapes and found them "quite difficult to hear;" some felt frustrated because they could not ask the tape a question; others complained that note taking was difficult because of the rapidity of the speakers; while one said some of the tapes were "conductive to sleep."

On the basis of my interpretation of both negative and positive responses, I would conclude that overall the tapes were well received as an aid, but not as a substitute, for the teaching of this course. The students were quite able to detect a quality tape from one which was suffering from technical difficulties. It became evident that a

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sense of expertise would have to be developed in making these tapes, both from an organizational as well as technical standpoint. The primary criticism was not directed at the use of the tapes, but rather at the quality of the tapes. Expertise can be learned by the faculty member. His task, however, will be made easier if he keeps in mind comments and observations such as those made by my students.

The use of the tapes in the teaching of state and local government was well received by both the participants and the students. In order to better understand the supplemental use of the videotape, it becomes necessary to examine more closely just how this approach actually aids the traditional approach.

How the Videotape Supplements the Traditional Approach

As was stated earlier, the videotape is not perceived as a substitute for the lecture, reading, and discussion approach. The value of the videotape is not as a substitute but as an aid. Its value is not in what it replaces, but in what it adds. The following are some of the positive features which complement the traditional approach.

First, it can offer all students taking this required course increased access to political personalities. For example, some will argue that it is better to bring the individuals themselves to class in order that students can question them. This certainly is a valid point; however, since state and local government is a required course, there may be as many as twenty sections offered in one semester. In reality it would probably be extreme good fortune to persuade an

individual to visit four out of twenty sections. The videotape would allow more students increased access to more political figures.

Second, the videotape better enables the student to learn more about the specifics of his own, immediate political environment, such as his city, county, or state, as well as the broad characteristics of the political environment generally cited in textbooks or lectures. For example, if a student in Randall County, Texas were to view a tape made by his county judge, and a student in Harris, County, Texas were to view a tape made by his county judge, they would both learn much more about the specifics of their own county government than their text material would be able to provide.

Third, the tapes can enable the students to stay abreast of developing problems as well as developing solutions in state and local government. It is important to keep the tapes current so that the students can identify the individuals who hold the office at that particular moment. Many times both the instructor and the textbook cannot be current, because they generally speak after the fact. The tapes can give evidence of how the decision making process unfolds by exposing the students to the contemporary thinking of the decision maker. The tape can provide the student with insight as to how the decision was reached, something that the traditional approach can seldom do.

Fourth, another additive which the videotape brings to the traditional approach is that it permits additional material to be

brought to the attention of the student, material which would not normally be covered either by the lecturer or the textbook. It is generally additional material because it is information which the practitioner of government, not just the teacher-scholar thinks is significant for learning. For example, in a tape which I used pertaining to local taxes, the county tax assessor-collector and the city-school tax assessor-collector talked to the students about the type of information they felt the students should know as taxpayers in this particular locale. This proved to be extremely interesting and valuable to the students. Because of its somewhat technical nature neither the instructor nor the textbook writer were inclined to handle it in their presentation. However, it was the type of information from which every student of local and state government could benefit. Therefore, in this particular tape, additional information was brought to the attention of the student.

Fifth, the videotape can add to the traditional approach by providing the student with more than the two traditional teachers: the lecturer and the textbook. The videotape can be used to extend the classroom into the halls of government, and to provide the student with an endless source of individuals who have so much to teach the young people about their own political system. For example, in a tape which I used, the students were actually exposed to the District Courtroom through a lecture by the District Judge.

Finally, the videotape can communicate to the student a sense of realism about his government which extends far beyond whatever truths the instructor and textbook can relate.

In this writer's opinion, all of the aforementioned positive features of using this teaching supplement bring to the learner added dimensions to knowledge that the traditional approach is unable to bring. What this approach brings is important for one basic reason. It enhances the learning process, and I would hope the willingness of the student to take that added knowledge and utilize it by participating in the political process at the state and local level. I believe that the use of the videotape can do this because for the first time, the student can see his political system and relate to that system through people. The videotape is not necessary in order to relate political institutions and processes to the student, but it is necessary in relating to the student the humanness of government. It is in this particular area that the videotape can make its greatest contribution to the learning process.

Problems and Possibilities

The use of the videotape in teaching state and local government in Texas presents us with both problems and potentialities. Do not let my enthusiasm blind you to either. There are two basic problems: inertia on the part of the faculty and obtaining institutional financial support.

One basic problem or obstacle which must be overcome before the full potential of this approach can be realized is the initial apprehension of many political scientists to use the techniques of modern technology in the teaching process. Certainly this apprehension

is not limited to political scientists. Jerome Ziegler makes this point quite well.

Many faculty members make little or no use of the technology available to help students acquire information. Television, tapes, cassettes, programmed learning packages, the computer, and dial-access technology have transformed the way information is delivered, and indeed young students today have acquired a great deal of information from television by the time they arrive as freshmen. But often teachers seem put off by all the new technology and simply fail to make use of it, relying instead on the textbook and the lecture.

I have the impression from talking with many faculty members that they are somewhat skeptical of these methods. But if faculty could be persuaded to learn how to use them with confidence, their own function could be altered with advantage to the student. Faculty could then become not merely purveyors of information, although that would always be part of their task, but they would have more time to interpret, to ask the questions of implication, to help students develop insight and a point of view. In short, technology should free the teacher to weigh more heavily the "adventure of ideas," to borrow a phrase from Whitehead, and to think about combining theory and practice, abstraction and concrete fact in fresh ways so that the distinctions between what is "liberal" and what is "technical or vocational" will break down.⁵

If the first problem becomes one of persuading the faculty member, the second problem becomes one of persuading the administration. This involves the financial obstacle, i.e., securing the money

⁵Jerome M. Ziegler, "Some Questions Before Us: Notes Toward The Future in Higher Education," Daedalus, 2 (Winter, 1975), p. 216.

for necessary equipment in order to carry out the task properly. A camera, perhaps a lightweight Sony "porta-pak," which will take a half-inch videotape, a videotape player, television sets, and tapes are necessary equipment. Like WTSU, many colleges and universities have this equipment available in their media centers; however, in this situation the equipment is generally shared throughout the entire institution, and many times the equipment is not available when the political scientist may need it. In addition to a camera, each classroom where the course is being offered must have at least one television set. A great deal of time and effort is wasted when the equipment has to continually be searched out and moved around. Thus securing the required funding for the purchase of the necessary equipment is a major problem to be overcome if this approach is to be used with maximum efficiency.

If, however, these two major problems can be overcome, the use of the videotape in the teaching of state and local government in Texas is almost unlimited. Let me note only a few of the possibilities that I can foresee. First, in addition to supplementing the traditional approach, the use of the videotape can add a great deal to the development of individualized instruction programs in teaching this course. There are tremendous opportunities for strengthening our correspondence courses by the use of the videotape. It is very possible that many students who are taking the course by correspondence could come to the campus on a Saturday and view a number of these tapes. The videotape could be used by the slow learner,

who would like to observe the material any number of times. Finally, I believe, that through a central library of videotapes, perhaps established at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, an invaluable source of material could be developed, which would be available to all teachers of state and local government in Texas. The library of videotapes could be established in two ways. First, if an individual professor felt that he had produced a good tape on some aspect of state and local government, he could send the tape to the center where it would be reproduced, catalogued, and made available for use by other professors. Periodically professors throughout the state would be informed as to what is available and then they could borrow the tape from the center. In addition to the input by individual professors, the center located in Austin could produce a number of tapes with the various governmental officials who have offices in Austin. These tapes would also be made available to professors on loan from the center. This system would enable the utilization of a vast amount of material which could be shared. In this way, students could travel via the videotape to the House Chamber in Austin or to the State Supreme Court or to the seat of the Texas Railroad without ever leaving their classroom.

Concluding Remarks

Those of us who teach state and local government in Texas must continually ask ourselves what should be taught and how it should be taught. Early in this paper I stated that I did not believe that the traditional approach alone engaged the student in either the

learning process or the political process to the extent which I believe they are capable of being engaged. At this point the question could be raised as to whether or not the use of the videotape as a teaching aid was an improvement over the traditional approach. After one semester, I cannot offer you empirical data which supports the idea that students learned more from the videotape than from the lecture approach alone; nor can I prove that a higher percentage of my students will now become involved in the political process. The intent of this paper was to prove neither. My purpose was to share with you some of my experiences and thoughts about the videotape as a teaching aid in state and local government in Texas.

The videotape, as a teaching aid, helped me to better fulfill my course goals. The videotape brought a new dimension, the human dimension, to the learning process, which affected the interest, awareness, and knowledge of my students about their state and local political system in a positive fashion.